

Helping children handle peer pressure

The urge to conform to their peers (kids the same age) is a normal stage for kids ranging in age from about 12 to 21. At this stage, children start looking to their peers—not their parents—to help them figure out everything from what clothes to wear to how serious to be about school. Parents can play an important role in this process by helping kids learn to make good choices when they're being influenced—for better or worse—by their peers.

Is peer pressure always negative?

People tend to focus on the bad effects of peer pressure, but the desire to be like their peers can help children, too. On the positive side, peer pressure can provide kids with:

- Friendship, acceptance, and a chance to build lasting bonds.
- Positive examples of how to work hard and be honest, kind, and loyal.
- Feedback and advice as they try out new ideas, explore beliefs and discuss problems.
- Opportunities to get to meet new people and work out differences.
- Encouragement to do their best, and someone to talk to when they feel like they've failed.
- Support to try new sports, clubs, activities, foods, and music.

Unfortunately, peer pressure can also lead to risky behavior, such as:

- Smoking.
- Sex.
- Drug, alcohol, or inhalant abuse.
- Unsafe use of social media and cell phones.
- Cheating and shoplifting.

What makes kids vulnerable to peer pressure?

The one thing that seems to make all adolescents vulnerable to peer pressure is simply being in this age range. They're just doing what kids their age (middle school to high school) do. Research suggests that peer pressure can be especially difficult to resist because, at this stage of their lives, lots of kids:

- Want to fit in and be like the kids they admire.
- Want to do what other kids are doing, and have what other kids have.
- Don't want to feel awkward or uncomfortable.
- Are afraid of being rejected or made fun of.
- Don't know how to get out of a pressure situation.
- Aren't sure what they really want.

What can parents do to help?

As normal as it is for adolescents to go along with their peers, it can be just as normal for parents to take their children's challenging behavior personally. Just try to remember that kids aren't so much rejecting you as they are trying to establish their own identity.

Whether your child is the most popular kid in class or is someone who has few friends, peer pressure can push him or her to do unhealthy things.

Adolescents still need a parent's help to make good decisions—even if they don't act like it. Help them become the people you hope they can be by helping them learn to:

- **Say "no."** It can be hard to resist the pressure to engage in risky behavior when other kids are doing it. Before your kids find themselves in one of these situations, role-play with them. Help your kids figure out how to respond when someone says to them, "Come on and have a drink with us. It's way more fun than studying. Or are you too chicken?" or "I really like you a lot. Let's text each other some pictures of ourselves naked. It's called sexting. Everybody's doing it."
- **Develop good self-esteem.** Take time to praise your child and celebrate his/her achievements. Children who feel good about themselves are more able to resist negative peer pressure and make better choices.
- **Choose their friends wisely.** This means online friends too. Lots of people (peers and adults) try to pressure kids to make bad choices. But if your children have friends with good values and good self-esteem, they can help your kids make sense of new technology, stay away from risky behavior and resist unwanted peer pressure.
- **Create special code words.** These are special words your children can use when they want your help but don't want their friends to know they're asking you for it. For example, if they don't feel comfortable at a party, your children can call or text you with an agreed-upon phrase like, "Mom, I have a really bad earache. Can you come get me?"

- **Use you as an excuse.** Let your kids know that if they ever face peer pressure they don't know how to resist, they can always refuse by blaming you: "My parents will ground me for a month if I do that."

And you can help yourself by learning to:

- **Stay calm.** If your children want to do something you don't agree with, try not to overreact. Dying their hair purple or wearing sloppy clothes can seem like your children are rebelling. Compare this kind of behavior with how your kids are doing in school, who their friends are, and how maturely they usually behave. If they're doing well in these other areas, try not to get upset, and resist the urge to judge or lecture them.
- **Stay informed.** Pay attention to the substances that kids this age are using, the way they dress, and how they're using the latest cell phones, social media, and other technologies. The more you know, the better you can protect your kids and help them learn to make good decisions.
- **Stay in your kids' lives.** Even though they may not act like it, most children this age still listen to their parents. Keep talking to them—about their interests, accomplishments, and friends; about the music they listen to; and about the things that bother them. Let them know you care, but make it clear that you expect them to follow certain rules. And keep planning family activities that include them.

Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)

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